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A NOTE ON VOLTAIRE'S *Lettres Philosophiques*

Professor Lanson, in his carefully annotated edition of Voltaire's *Lettres Philosophiques* (*Société des textes français modernes*), has indicated the general and particular sources of most of the statements made by Voltaire in regard to Shakespeare. One of the most striking remarks, however, and one for which there is no source suggested, is contained in the second sentence of the eighteenth letter which reads as follows: "Shakespeare, qui passoit pour le Corneille des Anglais, fleurissoit à peu près dans le tems de Lopez de Vega; il créa le théâtre. . . ." The idea that Shakespeare created the English theatre seems to have gained credence in France, for La Place says of Shakespeare in the preface to his *Théâtre anglais*: "Ce poète doit être regardé comme l'Inventeur de l'Art Dramatique en Angleterre. C'est lui, qui le premier a donné, dans son pays, une espèce de forme à un spectacle, qui n'en avoit point avant lui. Il n'eut ni modèles ni rivaux. . . ." The theory that Shakespeare had no models was evidently accepted by some writers in England as well as in France. John Dennis says in a letter dated February 1st, 1711, entitled *On the Genius and Writings of Shakespeare*: "One may say of him as they did of Homer, that he had none to imitate. . . ." The same idea is repeated on page 203 of the *Journal littéraire* for 1717: "Cet auteur (Shakespeare) n'a imité personne. . . ." Voltaire's remark, however, is not a mere deduction from this false statement.

As Professor Lanson says in regard to Voltaire's views of the English stage in general, many of his statements are undoubtedly echoes of conversations which he had with English gentlemen; and perhaps some admirers of the Elizabethan dramatist may have said to Voltaire, with more enthusiasm than strict regard for the truth, that Shakespeare created the stage in England. There are, however, printed sources of this idea to be found in no less a critic than Dryden. In the prolog to his version of Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* he puts the following lines into the mouth of the ghost of Shakespeare:

Untaught, unpractised, in a barbarous age,
I found not, but created first the stage.

Nor is this a mere passing thought of a poet writing laudatory verse, for Dryden refers to Shakespeare in the preface to *All for Love* as the one "who began Dramatique Poetry amongst us," and again in the *Discourse on Satire* he speaks of "Shakespeare, who created the Stage among us." Thus Voltaire's rather striking remark "Il créa le théâtre," whether he meant it literally or somewhat figuratively, was not merely a sweeping statement of a young foreigner who was inaccurate enough to say, a few lines further on, that after *two* hundred years Shakespeare's bizarre and gigantic ideas were passing as sublime; but this is plainly an idea that had been expressed in England and was neither accurate nor original with Voltaire.

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THE CHRONOLOGY OF A GROUP OF POEMS BY W. C. BRYANT

The preface to *The Poetical Works of William Cullen Bryant*,¹ edited by Parke Godwin, states that "the poems of Mr. Bryant, collected by him during his lifetime, are here given as he left them, with the exception that they are arranged according to the dates at which they were written or printed, as far as these dates, now attached to the poems, could be ascertained," and adds that "this general collection of his writings is intended to be complete and final."

The Roslyn Edition of *The Poetical Works of William Cullen Bryant*² contains in the publishers' note the statement that the accompanying chronologies of Bryant's Life and Poems and the bibliography of his Poetical and Prose Writings are "the result of several years of careful research" by Mr. Henry C. Sturges.

How far Sturges's chronology of Bryant's Life, "founded on Parke Godwin's biography of Bryant," and his chronology of Bryant's Poems may in general deviate in their statements from those of Godwin in his *Life and Works of William Cullen Bryant*, remains to be demonstrated. A partial comparison made in the

¹ *Life and Works of William Cullen Bryant*. New York, Appleton, 1883-1884. I-II, A Biography . . . ; III-IV, The Poetical Works . . . ; V-VI, Prose Writings. . .

² New York, Appleton, 1903. 1 vol.